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DICTIONARIES AND LANGUAGE CHANGE.

BY- POOLEY, ROBERT C.
NATIONAL COUNCIL OF TEACHERS OF ENG.,CHAMPAIGN,ILL

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TWO VIEWS OF A DICTIONARY'S PURPOSE CAME INTO SHARP CONFLICT UPON THE PUBLICATION OF WEBSTER'S "THIRD NEW INTERNATIONAL UNABRIDGED DICTIONARY." THE FIRST VIEW IS THAT A DICTIONARY IS A REFERENCE BOOK ON LANGUAGE ETIQUETTE, AN AUTHORITY FOR MAINTAINING THE PURITY OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE. THE SECOND IS THAT A DICTIONARY IS A SCIENTIFIC DESCRIPTIVE RECORD OF PAST AND PRESENT ENGLISH USAGE, REGARDLESS OF TASTES, OPINIONS, AND PREJUDICES. THIS SECOND VIEW IS HELD BY THE EDITORS OF THE "THIRD EDITION," A DICTIONARY WHICH PROVIDES DEFINITIONS, LABELLING WHERE APPROPRIATE, AND QUOTATIONS, AND WHICH ALLOWS THE INTELLIGENT READER TO JUDGE THE USE OF A WORD, WITHOUT RELYING UPON AN AUTHORITY. AFTER A CONSIDERATION OF WHAT SHOULD BE EXPECTED OF A CONTEMPORARY INTERNATIONAL UNABRIDGED DICTIONARY, IT CAN BE CONCLUDED THAT "WEBSTER'S THIRD INTERNATIONAL" WILL BE, IF IT IS NOT ALREADY, REGARDED AS A VALUABLE LEXICOGRAPHIC TOOL AND AN ENLIGHTENED ADVANCE IN THE WRITING OF DICTIONARIES. (THIS ARTICLE APPEARED IN "LANGUAGE, LINGUISTICS, AND SCHOOL PROGRAMS, PROCEEDINGS OF THE SPRING INSTITUTES, 1963." CHAMPAIGN, ILL., NCTE, 1963.) (MM)

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DICTIONARIES AND LANGUAGE CHANGE

ROBERT C. POOLEY
University of Wisconsin

One of the most interesting questions to arise in recent times is, "What is a dictionary of English, and what is its purpose?" The publication of the G. & C. Merriam Webster *Third New International Unabridged Dictionary* in 1961 suddenly lifted this question from the obscurity of the scholar's study to the fierce limelight of the popular press. All at once editors, writers, businessmen, and professional men discovered that they knew what a dictionary was, and why it was made; and they were positive in a highly vocal manner that the Third International Webster's was not what they thought a dictionary should be, nor what they wanted. In their outraged indignation they resorted to invective and misstatement or misquotation of a force and virulence more commonly expected of political disagreements than of scholarly disputes. Indeed, this controversy was not a scholarly dispute, but a series of blasts so far removed from scholarly objectivity as to become ludicrous. The outcries of offended reviewers resembled the roars of a child whose favorite toy has been snatched away. Lest you think I exaggerate in these opinions, let me read a sampling of the protests.

The Assault on Webster III

From the *Chicago Tribune* (September 7, 1961): "Saying Ain't Ain't Wrong: See Webster. The word 'ain't' ain't a grammatical mistake anymore. And there are some prepositions you can end a sentence with. If anyone disagrees, look it up in the dictionary—the forthcoming 'Webster's Third New International Dictionary.'"[1]

From the *Toronto Globe and Mail* (September 8, 1961): "A dictionary's embrace of the word 'ain't' will comfort the ignorant, confer approval upon the mediocre, and subtly imply that proper English is the tool only of the snob; but it will not assist men to speak truly to other men. It may, however, prepare us for that future which it could help to hasten. In the caves, no doubt, a grunt will do."

From the *Chicago Daily News* (September 9, 1962): "While flinching at 'seen' the lexicographers justify the word 'ain't' on the

[1]For this and subsequent quotations from critics of the Third International I am indebted to the excellent study, *Dictionaries and* THAT *Dictionary*, by James Sledd and Wilma R. Ebbitt, Chicago: Scott, Foresman & Co., 1962.

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ground that it is 'used orally in most parts of the United States by cultivated speakers.' Cultivated, our foot. 'Ain't' still makes its user stand out like Simple Simon in a roomful of nuclear physicists."

From the *Washington Sunday Star* (September 10, 1963): "Alas, how unstern and almost unscholarly scholarship seems to have become. Small wonder that our English-speaking world, when it thus tolerates the debasement of its language, is having trouble with creatures like beatniks—not to mention Nikita Khrushchev and his kind—who are developing a style of writing that may best be described as literary anarchy, to use a polite word."

From the *New York Times* (September 10, 1961): ". . . Webster's International Unabridged Dictionary faced this puzzler: Were there enough hipsters to dig all the new jazz, or would the old bop do for a while? They decided not to be squares and to beef up the old words with some new definitions, add some new words, and finalize it by rewriting the whole works."

Also from the *New York Times* (October 12, 1961): "A passel of double-domes at the G. & C. Merriam Company joint in Springfield, Mass., have been confabbing and yakking for twenty-seven years—which is not intended to infer that they have not been doing plenty work—and now they have finalized Webster's Third New International Dictionary, Unabridged, a new edition of that swell and esteemed word book. Those who regard the foregoing paragraph as acceptable English prose will find that the new Webster's is just the dictionary for them. . . . Webster's has, it is apparent, surrendered to the permissive school that has been busily extending its beachhead on English instruction in the schools. This development is disastrous because, intentionally or unintentionally, it serves to reinforce the notion that good English is whatever is popular."

Finally, from the *Chicago Daily News* (October 21, 1961): "Lemme recommend a swell new book that has been in the works for twenty-seven years and has just been finalized—no kidding—by the G. & C. Merriam Co. in Springfield, Mass. It's Webster's Third New International Dictionary, Unabridged, and word-wise it's a gasser. In this new edition it turns out that good English ain't what we thought it was at all—good English, man, is whatever is popular. This is a nifty speak-as-you-go dictionary. Not like that moldy-fig of a Second Edition, which tried to separate 'standard English' from slang, bastardized formations, colloquialisms, and all the passing fads and fancies of spoken English."

These evaluations, and hundreds like them, were obviously written in the heat of exasperation. We may well ask, why should the publication of a new dictionary arouse heated exasperation? The foregoing quotations do not reflect profound thought or careful analysis. They are obviously prejudiced and in some instances highly illogical. But why? Why should men whose profession it is to comment critically and intelligently upon current events so unanimously give vent to peevish, shallow, mocking commentary on a serious work? The answer is, of course, they were looking for one kind of book, and they found quite another kind. In their hurt surprise they lashed out with the weapons of their trade, ridicule and invective, without really stopping to examine carefully what the new book is. I shall try to depict what they expected to find, and to analyze what they did find. Perhaps our judgments, at this remoteness from the publication date, can be more objective, and therefore more temperate.

The Role of a Dictionary: Basic Conceptual Difference

There are two conflicting views of what a dictionary ought to be, and upon the publication of the Third International these two views came into sharp conflict. The first view is that a dictionary is a standard or norm to maintain the purity and correctness of the English language. It is a book of reference to settle disputes and to answer differences. It is an Emily Post of words and idioms. What the dictionary upholds is good English—what the dictionary condemns is bad English. In a time of wavering standards and loose manners it is a staunch, trustworthy defender of the good, the true, and the beautiful. It is not at all difficult to see how such a view might arise. And one must fairly grant that G. & C. Merriam Company went a long way to create and maintain such an image of the dictionary. For years their advertising slogan has been "G. & C. Merriam Webster Dictionary—The Supreme Authority." When the Supreme Authority suddenly asserts that it is no longer an authority, but only a witness, it is no wonder that cries of protest arose. No one likes to have his props knocked from under him, no matter how fragile they may be. In the quotations I read earlier I am sure you observed the feeling constantly expressed that the new dictionary had let the writer down, had let the public down, had, indeed, let the English language down! We must admit, that if the purpose of a dictionary is to be the final authority in disputable matters, then the new Third International has indeed abdicated its office.

There is, however, a second view of what a dictionary ought to be, a view that has been growing in recognition and support in recent

years. This view is that a dictionary is a scientific, unbiased, wholly objective record of the English language as it has been in the past and as it is at the moment of forming the dictionary, and that everything that occurs in the language, regardless of tastes, opinions, and prejudices, must be duly set down. Let Dr. Philip B. Gove, Editor-in-Chief of the Third International, express this view in his own words:

"Ideally, the linguist should be able to observe all linguistic events. Every human utterance should come before his scrutiny. At present no one has time, machinery, or qualified assistants to record, to store or analyze on such an ideal scale. So the linguist has to sample. No matter what professional or occupational group is selected for sampling, he finds that linguistic principles of speech are little understood by its own users. These principles are so generally misunderstood that a native speaker of English is handicapped in teaching his own language to foreigners. . . . Yet that anyone who talks English can teach it is a widely prevalent notion. . . ."

In setting forth the principles upon which the new lexicography is to be founded, Dr. Gove quotes from the National Council of Teachers of English some words which I wrote for the first curriculum volume entitled, *The English Language Arts.* These words are:

1. Language changes constantly
2. Change is normal
3. Spoken language is the language
4. Correctness rests upon usage
5. All usage is relative

Such a set of principles runs directly counter to the popular view that there is only one standard which is correct, and that the dictionary founds and maintains this standard. Commenting on this view, Professor W. Nelson Francis says, "The old notion persists . . . that there is some other source and sanction for language, and that the linguistic behavior of the great majority of native speakers is in some way degenerate and corrupt. It is certainly the duty of the English teacher to disabuse his students of this notion, which leads to linguistic uncertainty, self-consciousness, and timid commonplaces." When a dictionary is constructed upon principles of linguistic observation, it can no longer be conceived of as a rule book, a set of rubrics, or a final authority.

When a great chemist is called an authority on colloids, it does not mean that he controls and regulates colloids, but rather that he knows more about their behavior than do other chemists. This is a perfectly proper use of the word "authority" and it may be properly

applied to a dictionary. To call a dictionary "an authority" is to say, in proper usage, that it presents more knowledge about the words of English than does any other source. This claim the new Third International can easily maintain. What we need to do for ourselves and for our students is to adjust our minds to this interpretation of the word "authority." Since I have quoted generously from the critics who support the older notion of authority, let me here quote a newspaper writer who states succinctly the position of the new interpretation of authority. This is by Millicent Taylor, writing in the *Christian Science Monitor* (November 29, 1961): "The editors of the Third Edition have set out to give as completely as possible a projection of the English language as it is currently being used in all walks of life for all sorts of identified communication needs. Within their chosen pattern, as a scientific study, the Third Edition is an intensely interesting and distinguished scholarly work, an important milestone in the history of a particularly living, flexible, and beautiful language."

Thus far in presenting the battle over the new dictionary I have offered evidence from what appear to be hasty reactions, such as the cry one makes when his toes are trod on. But more serious in every way is the condemnation of the new dictionary on linguistic and philosophical grounds by an experienced writer composing his essay in relative leisure. In the *Atlantic* for January, 1962, Wilson Follett contributes an article entitled "Sabotage in Springfield." He begins by saying that what is undoubtedly a great linguistic event can in a few minutes be discovered to be "a very great calamity." Why is it a calamity? I summarize his reasons:

1. It does not give encyclopedic information.
2. It is not a direct continuation of the Second Edition.
3. It is a fighting document. ". . . it has gone over bodily to the school that construes traditions as enslaving, the rudimentary principles of syntax as crippling, and taste as irrelevant."
4. It has abrogated the responsibility of a lexicographer to be an authority.
5. It presents examples of current English which Mr. Follett does not like (*due to, like* as a conjunction).
6. It wastes space by quoting the usage of authors.
7. The definitions are clumsy and not punctuated.

Mr. Follett concludes, "The rock bottom practical truth is that the lexicographer cannot abrogate his authority if he wants to. [Note that this sentence ends with a preposition, a "calamity" to some other critics.] He may think of himself as a detached scientist reporting the

facts of language . . . but the myriad consultants of his work are not going to see him so . . . the work itself, by virtue of its inclusions and exclusions, is a whole universe of judgments, received by millions as the Word from on high."

It is curious that a man of Mr. Follett's abilities considers it good to preserve this myth of omniscient authority, and bad to tell the public the truth about the language they speak. This is a kind of aristocratic paternalism, a father-knows-best kind of reasoning which I cannot conceive of Mr. Follett's holding in any other sphere of human activity. I suppose that being weaned from specious authority is just as painful and productive of angry wails as being weaned from maternal nourishment.

Using Personal Judgment in Webster III

The quotations and comments thus far would seem to give the impression that the new Third International had abandoned all guides to usage and simply presented uncritically all words and phrases of English regardless of social approval. But such is by no means the case. The essential difference is that whereas in earlier dictionaries usage levels were labelled, in this dictionary the reader is given the evidence to form his own judgment. Take, for example, the controversial use of *like* as a conjunction. It is there, of course, in the Third International, and under certain usages it has the label *archaic.* But for contemporary use there is no label such as *substandard* or *colloquial;* instead one reads "impromptu programs where they ask questions much like I do on the air—Art Linkletter." This is clear enough; if you want to talk like Art Linkletter, use *like* like Art Linkletter does. If you want to speak with elegance, you will avoid it. Why should the dictionary tell you what to do?

Another clue to level of usage is found in the definitions themselves. Take, for example, the noun *boondoggle.* The entry reads "[coined 1925 by Robert H. Link b. 1897 Am. scoutmaster] 1. a handicraft article esp. of leather or wicker fashioned for utility 2. an impracticable or useless project wasteful of time or money." Is this not just the information you need? You can deduce that definition 2 is a figurative extension of definition 1; that the word is recent and a coinage, even in its literal meaning. If you choose to use the word you need no further level. Your judgment will help you to determine where it is appropriate or inappropriate. Take for a moment the opposite case. Suppose *boondoggle* were labelled "slang," yet you find it in a serious speech by a respected United States Senator? What

then is your judgment? Is the Senator an ignoramus, or is the dictionary in error? What aid to you is such labelling?

Nevertheless, there is some labelling in the new dictionary. Let us examine the word *stinker*. The definition reads, "1. one that stinks, as (1) an offensive or disgustingly contemptible person 〈 a mean little ~ who kills puppy dogs—Time" 〉 But note *slang*: something extremely difficult 〈 said the three-hour examination was a real ~ and left him exhausted 〉 There is a distinction here between the extension of the literal use of the word to a person, which is unlabelled, and the figurative use, which is marked *slang*. By means of quotations, factual definitions, and labelling where appropriate, the new dictionary provides almost as much of a guide to usage as the intelligent reader needs. For the less informed reader there are undoubtedly pitfalls. This dictionary contains hundreds of unlabelled words and phrases which the discriminating writer would not use at all. How is the precocious child or the ambitious foreigner to discover these distinctions? It must be admitted that the Third International does not always help such persons, and it may well be that guides to English usage, such as that of Bergen and Cornelia Evans, may come into much wider demand.

It is certain that no dictionary can please everyone, and that in adopting one kind of attitude toward the language of English speakers, the editors of the Third International have had to abandon certain values to be found in the popular view of the dictionary as an authority. Language is bound to change. What is at the moment acceptable may soon become obsolete or for one reason or another unacceptable. What is momentarily slang, frivolous, or improper may shortly become staid, dignified, and proper. Labels cannot control such change, nor when used can they be fully relied upon.

The new dictionary has been much condemned for abandoning the label "colloquial." But what does "colloquial" mean? Does it mean suitable for speech, but unsuitable for writing? If so, what kind of speech, under what circumstances? And is there only one kind of writing, of a tone more elevated than any kind of speech? It is easy to see how difficult the application of such a label may become, and with what relief the editors of the Third International abandoned it. In the final analysis the choice seems to be this: Is it better to rely upon one's own resources for discriminations with the chance of error, but also with the gain of growth in discrimination, or to rely upon

an authority for discriminations which may have been accurate at the time they were set down, but in many instances soon become inaccurate? Most persons of independent mind will choose the former and run the risks. The editors of the Third International have done us the honor to assume that we would prefer to make our own judgments.

What a Dictionary Should Do

It is fair to conclude this discussion by attempting to answer the question, What should we expect of a contemporary international unabridged dictionary? I shall number the points. Undoubtedly there are many more.

1. It must be complete. There should be missing no word, exclusive of proper names, commonly or uncommonly used in modern English, or found in English literature of modern times. The new dictionary has chosen 1755 as the cut-off date for obsolete words. There are historical dictionaries for words of former times, or archaic meanings of words still current.

2. It must define words with clarity and sharpness. There is criticism of the definitions in the Third International for excessive clumsiness. Nevertheless, by adopting a uniform style for definitions certain confusions and inaccuracies have been avoided. Once again it is a matter of choice: simplicity with inaccuracy, or complexity with accuracy. For an international, unabridged dictionary the choice on behalf of accuracy seems wise, despite some awkwardness of syntax.

3. It must show how to pronounce words. The pronunciation key of the Third International is a great improvement over that of the Second. A large number of unneeded diacritical marks have been abandoned, and the schwa [ə] has been employed for practically all unaccented syllables. The much simpler key means that most symbols are self-pronouncing, and the key is no longer printed at the bottom of the page.

4. It must indicate the spelling of words. Variant spellings are provided; one of the chief points of criticism of the new dictionary is the inclusion of *alright*. Since *already* has long been in use, the clamor over *alright* appears illogical. The reason, however, is not hard to find. *Alright* happens to be on the forbidden lists of editors and English teachers. *Tho* as a variant of *though* is included, but *nite* as a variant of *night* is omitted.

5. It must present the etymology of words. This the Third International does well and concisely. After a few abbreviations are mastered, the key to word history is easy to use. The etymologies are also very well cross-referenced, often with the phrase "more under ———."

6. It must show how to write and print words, especially those combinations of words written as one, hyphenated, or set apart. This is an exceedingly complex matter which the Third International does as well as it can. Common word combinations are usually written as one word, like *birdcage* and *gasman;* the hyphen is retained for adjective combinations as in *hard-hitting;* but *hardheaded* and *hard-hearted* are unbroken. Names that are compounded of several words are generally hyphenated, as in the name of a flower, *bird-on-the-wing.*

7. It must guide the reader in the use of capital letters. Almost all entries of this dictionary, since proper nouns are eliminated, are in lower case. The use of capital letters is indicated by four symbols: *cap,* meaning always capitalized; *usu.cap,* more often capitalized than not; *often cap,* acceptable either way; and *sometimes cap,* more often not capitalized.

The Third International does not contain biographical entries, nor the names of cities, states, and nations, nor proper names applying to persons or events, nor other encyclopedic material. Dictionary users accustomed to looking for these kinds of information in a dictionary are naturally annoyed at not finding it. Yet, useful as it may be, it is not strictly linguistic information. To include it would mean the exclusion of other materials more properly the content of a dictionary. The omission of these matters means, of course, that some kind of encyclopedic guide will have to supplement the dictionary, and that biographical facts, geographical facts, proper names, historical events, and the like can no longer be found in the pages of the dictionary.

I am convinced that when the howls of outrage have died down, when the critics have had time and opportunity to study closely what they superficially condemned, and when the scholarly public has grown accustomed to the pattern of definition and quotation in the new dictionary, the verdict in the years ahead will be that Webster's Third International Dictionary, Unabridged, is not only a valuable lexicographical tool, but has become a milestone in the advance of the writing of dictionaries.

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